

TRUE HISTORY OF THE ORPHEUM THEATRE
SAUGERTIES, N. Y.

The Orpheum Theatre, Saugerties, was built and opened in 1908 by the Davis family. The theatre had a straight floor so that, in addition to motion pictures, it could also be used for basketball, roller skating, and dancing. On December 10, 1917, K. E. Davis of Saugerties leased the theatre to S. A. Huffman of New York City for five years, lease to take effect December 15, 1917. Mr. Huffman did not make a success of the venture, and Byron S. Thornton assumed the lease, with the permission of the Davis family, on November 15, 1919. The theatre opened under the management of Byron S. Thornton on Thanksgiving Day, 1919. In the early 1920's the theatre was purchased by Mr. Thornton, who then also purchased the lease on the Opera House, an upstairs theatre on the property where Chase Manhattan Bank now stands. Then Barney Thornton, as he was called by his numerous friends, closed the Orpheum Theatre and showed movies in the Opera House, while he renovated the Orpheum.

The Orpheum had many renovations in its day, but the biggest one was in the early 1920's when Nelson Burhans of West Camp was the general contractor for a huge renovation program. Mr. Burhans was a very able man. Some of the things he accomplished were to build up the side walls ~~six feet~~ and raise the roof six feet, replace the slightly horseshoe-shaped balcony with a steel balcony, which remains in the theatre to this day. Some of Mr. Burhans' sub-contractors were Mullen and Son, masonry, and Abbott Electrical Co., wiring. Mr. Burhans did a wonderful job.

In addition to the structural improvements to theatre in the 1920's, Barney was instrumental in having Vitagraph, Inc. (now Warner Bros.) film four pictures in and around Saugerties. One of them was a typical romantic drama with Anita Stewart and Earl Williams. Although I do not remember the name of the picture, I do recall that Miss Stewart jumped off a blazing ship at sea. The ship was the Steamer Ida in the ^{lower} Esopus Creek. Harry T. Morey in "The Rapids" was filmed in the upper Esopus Creek. Alice Calhoun starred in "Peggy Puts One Over", which co-starred ~~Jimmy~~ Patterson, a native of Saugerties whom the film company offered to place under contract, but he didn't go. Many people from Saugerties appeared in this picture. The fourth one was Corrine Griffith in "The Garter Girl". The big scenes for this picture were filmed in the Opera House with Miss Griffith flying over the audience and dropping her garter.

In the early 1920's the Saugerties Methodist Church used the theatre for services while they were building their new church on the corner of Washington Avenue and Post Street.

The theatre renovation included making it suitable to accommodate vaudeville acts, and in the 1920's Joe Dealy's Vaudeville started playing the local theatre on Monday nights. Some of the stars who played Saugerties were Gypsy Rose Lee, Cary Grant (then Archie Leach) who appeared first in a unicycle act, and returned as a male singer in a band; Joan Crawford who was part of a dancing girl quartette with a male star; Burns and Allen, comedy act; William Holden, Hopalong Cassidy, Ida Kramer (star of Abie's Irish Rose).

The stage show that drew the most people ever attending the theatre's two shows was "Peaches Browning". She was the wife of the much-publicized "Daddy" Browning. Nearly 1800 people paid to see her in one night. Many musicians played at the theatre during the early 1920's, however Rae Welsh's combo had the longest reign. She was the pianist and conductor, Joseph Hyman and Sidney Robinson played violin and Paul Tracy played drums. After they exited in 1926, Lulu Deyo Miller (Joe Dealy's pianist) filled in, and in December of 1927 a Robert Morgan organ was installed which featured Louise Cordy as organist. She was a theatre organist of excellence. The organ was a poor investment, because in 1929 "talkies" came in. The first all-talking picture was released by Warner Bros. and they also released a picture in which Al Jolsen sang. It was not long before all pictures were "talkies". By 1930 the theatre played only talking pictures, and the organ was silent.

In the 1920's the adult star was Theda Bara, billed as "The Wickedest Woman in the World". In the 1930's it was Mae West. One great contribution she made to the talking screen was when making her first picture, Paramount wanted to replace her leading man, Cary Grant. Mae said "If Grant goes, I go", and since she was the powerful boxoffice draw, Grant stayed and became truly one of the great stars of the screen.

In 1939, under the direction of William D. Thornton, the front of the theatre was done over by National Theatre Supply Company and Syracuse Glass, and new Heywood Wakefield chairs were installed, also a complete new Altec sound system, and many other improvements. 1939 was a big year for motion pictures. More people saw "Gone With The Wind" than any other picture ever made. It starred Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh. It was

produced by David O. Selznick and released by M.G.M. The picture ran four hours. The first runner-up was a picture also released in this year. It was "The Wizard of Oz" starring Judy Garland, who was second choice to Shirley Temple because Fox would not release Temple for the role. Frank Morgan played The Oz, Ray Bolger the Scarecrow, Bert Lahr the Lion, Jack Haley the Tinman, and Billie Burke the Good Witch. The all adult group of Singer's midgets were used in the picture to play the Munchkins. Adults playing children on stage and in the movies, because of laws regarding child labor, is as old as the art itself. The third most-patronized picture that ever played was "The Sound of Music", with Julie Andrews. These pictures were released in the days when a first class letter postage stamp was 3¢, so some later pictures have grossed more money because of higher admission prices at the boxoffice.

Some of the great stars in the late 30's and early 40's were Will Rogers, Shirley Temple, Spencer Tracy, Kathryn Hepburn, Bette Davis among others.

----- TO BE CONTINUED -----

Some facts you might care to use -

In the early 1900's many theatres like The Vista on Main Street Saugerties, opened. They were known in the trade as "store front theatres" and quickly exited when real theatres were built.

The first full length feature film was a Paramount picture, "The Squaw Man", which was a Cecil B. DeMille production in 1914. In 1915 "The Birth of a Nation", a B. W. Griffith production, was released.

In 1914 several other feature length films were made.





